

FLOATING LEAVES

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AND
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PREFACE

I should firstly warn some previous readers of my work. FLOATING LEAVES AND FALSE ECONOMIES is a call to thought and action rather than a literary essay: although, in its concern with what constitutes 'work' in a civilized society, and with the coercive, neo-feudal approach to paid employment that is being fostered at the moment in the UK, it addresses issues of concern to those writers, artists, musicians, actors, dancers and so forth who are trying to develop their potential in the absence of a living income from their art.

Although the act which occasioned this pamphlet- the Government's withdrawal of hardship benefit from all claimants without dependents who are deemed not to be 'actively seeking work' on the Government's terms- is a barbaric act that is likely to affect many, I am especially concerned (from a personal perspective) for those who are seeking to lead creative lives: the dole has provided many with the basic income required to develop their art without having to worry about the strictures of the market-place, and this has led to a flowering of creative endeavour at a grassroots level. The way that things are going, however, a lot of those people are going to be trapped in work: and not just the sort of thirty-five hour a week jobs that give people a chance of cramming some creative activity into their leisure time (as I do) but jobs with elastic working hours, fifty, sixty, seventy hour weeks that overbalance our existences and make creative- or any other human fulfilment except that which can sometimes come from 'normal' work- impossible. A few false moves, and I could be faced with a similar fate: that, or destitution: and this scares me witless.

Perhaps in most other European countries, I would have been reconciled to the System, integrating my green-tinged, libertarian socialism into an approved political context (something I tried with the Green Party a while back). Here, I feel that there is a choice: either the current system is crushed, or I am crushed. I wish I could turn my back on political matters and devote myself to my art: but, when faced with the prospect of being worked to death, simply to slake the greed and fear of those whom I do not respect, I need to act. This pamphlet is a part of my attempt at doing so. It may be read in conjunction with two other pieces, the intro to the next issue (#8) of MEMES, the magazine I edit, and an essay, WORK SHOP SLEEP, which is due to be anthologized shortly. But it also stands alone. It is made to be copied and any double-sided copier will accommodate. Above all, I hope that someone finds it useful.

FLOATING LEAVES AND FALSE ECONOMIES

1. A DESPERATE SITUATION

We all require a basic level of economic security: adequate food, warmth and shelter. Without these items, our attention will naturally turn to securing them by all means necessary. And it is certainly optimistic to expect people who spend their lives rooting for the basics to sustain a culture: just as it is unrealistic to expect this from people who are worked into the ground. That is no reflection on their ability to do so, but an assessment of a desperate situation.

Societies can be divided into those in which everyone has an unconditional entitlement to those basic needs and those in which they must be earned: whether through work or social conformity. Most societies are of the latter variety and have been that way through history. British society (in so far as it exists) certainly fell into this camp until recently: witness the Poor Laws, with their residential Workfare, and the Elizabethans with their infliction of capital punishment on those 'vagrants' unwilling to take part in compulsory labour. However, since the last World War, a commitment to basic survival rights has been implicit in Governmental policy, if not necessarily in public consciousness. Even those lazy, or rebellious, enough to turn down work, or leave employment for a life of leisure penury, were entitled to hardship benefit if they had no other source of income. If single, they had no automatic right to warmth or shelter: but at least they would be fed, by way of a hardship benefit standing (in 1992) at £25.47 a week (£20.15 for those under 25).

That basic entitlement has now been removed. It was removed quickly and with little resistance: but, as a result, Britons are again inhabiting a society where one's physical well-being might be dependent upon one's staying in work, or accepting work on the terms of the administrators of the current version of the Poor Law. This change, moreover, was made at a time of endemic unemployment, when vacancies were outnumbered by available 'jobseekers' by around ten to one: in other words, someone could lose all income from the State without any legitimate means of earning one privately. Walk the subways of any major British city and you'll see the result. This is a major change: and, what's more, it's been made deliberately, without a hint of

circumspection. This pamphlet attempts to outline what has happened and some possible causes: It does so as coolly and as prosaically as the subject matter merits, in the belief that the injustice and the danger speak for themselves. It builds on earlier, more emotional versions: this time, it is for the reader to supply the emotion and to act accordingly.

2. UNDESERVING CLAIMANTS

The right of sixteen and seventeen year olds to claim Income Support was removed during the third term of the current Conservative government, on the basis that all members of that age group were able either to join a Youth Training Scheme, or study whilst living at home with parental support. Those who fell outside these categories were condemned to zero income, at a time of high unemployment: many became homeless, some turned to pushing drugs, and others sold their bodies to survive (some thwarting their intentions by becoming HIV positive). Following a minor outcry, the situation has now been modified. Those who are able to prove, by way of a written statement from their parents, that they left home as a result of familial discord are entitled to claim benefit. Of course, many are unable to obtain such proof, from parents whom they find physically threatening, or who lack the basic verbal skills required. As a result, there are still a large number of teenagers without a legitimate source of income and an alternative to street life. Such individuals are not even divided into 'deserving' or 'undeserving' claimants. In what should be the heydays of their lives, they are simply left to drift, from the seeming assumption that everyone in that age group has a family able and willing to support them.

This is just one of a number of changes to the rights and living standards of claimants made by the current Government since 1979. For example, the punishment period of reduced benefit, for those leaving their jobs without 'just cause' was increased from six weeks to six months in two stages (the second in 1988): Income Support for those under 25 was reduced to around 80% of its previous level, in view of their expected familial support and lower wages in work; and benefits for all claimants had been pegged back below the rate of inflation and of annual pay settlements. Moreover, the administration of housing benefit was passed from the then-DHSS to hard-up, rate-capped local authorities who proceeded to impose 'reasonable' ceilings on payable rent, at the expense of those unlucky enough to live in less dilapidated

properties (the shortfall coming from their dole). Crucially, in 1987-following a shock horror Government report, which claimed that many people on the dole were both highly-qualified and against taking the work available, or going on the Government's schemes in the absence for all claimants were increased at a rate below the level of inflation of work-compulsory Restarts were introduced.

The aim of the Restart Initiative was to ensure that those in receipt about possible ways of returning to work or acquiring training. Before that time, the process had been sporadic and haphazard: for example, a bored clerk reading out job advertisements from the local evening newspaper to a nonplussed claimant. Restart intended to make the process efficient and a means of deterring those who were signing on whilst working. Although it was possible for a claimant to reject the advice of the 'Claimant Adviser' conducting the interview, it was often difficult to do so without jeopardizing one's status as 'available for work', just as if one had turned down a 'suitable' job offer via the Department of Employment. However, the pressure only really began to step up when the 'actively seeking work' rule was introduced in 1989.

This regulation obliged claimants to actively seek work in order to be eligible for full benefit: although, as before, those perceived as failing its test could claim a subsistence level of hardship benefit. New claimants under the regulations had to complete a Back To Work plan when signing on, often involving a promise to apply for a specified number of jobs each week: existing claimants were brought under the rule by the completion of similar 'contracts' at compulsory Restart Interviews. At the same time, paradoxically, some of the more liberal alternatives to worksearch, such as the Enterprise Allowance Scheme and certain varieties of Employment Training involving a measure of self-directed activity (such as the Business Enterprise Programme) were scaled down: leaving the worksearch as the main prescribed activity. Increasingly, where claimants were not pressurized into applying for work on the terms of what had now become the 'Employment Service'-with claimants metamorphosing into 'customers', as if they had a choice of whether or not to claim, and of their source of income- they were 'encouraged' to take part in regimented work-seeking and work-motivating activities such as JobClub and Restart training weeks. The aim of this activity was to redefine the claimant as a potential willing worker: a member of a flexible labour pool, instilled with a belief that 'any job is better than none' and, if educated or skilled, 'you have to go where the work is'.

3. IT IS AS SIMPLE AS THAT

This state of affairs could have persisted easily, with hardship benefit lingering on in the background. Certainly, the take-up was never large—of 6,333 claimants failing the actively seeking work test in the financial year 1991-92, only 1,493 applied for this benefit with 850 succeeding in their claims (1). Nonetheless, the failsafe existed: as did the principle that anyone, no matter how they thwarted the dictates of the Department of Employment, was entitled to a thousand calories a day. If the Government, or more specifically the ambitious, Thatcherite DSS Secretary of State Peter Lilley, had intended to change that state of affairs, then they were biding their time in search of an excuse.

This excuse arrived in August 1992, when, at a free festival near Newtown in Powys, the DSS arranged to take claims from around 100 people on the site and for payments to be made at the local post office. In the words of the Social Security Advisory Committee convened to consider the ensuing legislation, "There was considerable disquiet that these people, many of whom admitted to the press that they had no intention of seeking work, should be paid social security benefits and the Government determined to take action to ensure that those people who have no dependants who are not actively seeking work, should not have access to social security benefits" (2).

Certainly, the Conservative-leaning papers that summer—particularly the Mail and the Express—were full of stories of New Age Travellers living it up at the expense of hard-working taxpayers: and there's no doubt, alas, that many hard-working taxpayers felt aggrieved. It was simply the Fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper revisited, at a time of year when work is especially burdensome (when pupils are at home and France and Italy shut down) and there was considerable pressure on the Government, from their grass-roots supporters, for something to be done. Two months later, at the Conservative Party conference, Peter Lilley announced that he was about to end the 'something for nothing society' and, in early November, The Income Support (General) Amendment (No.3) Regulations 1992 were published.

The purpose of these Regulations was simply put in the Secretary of State's accompanying statement. "The Government" (it said) "has concluded that it cannot be right to expect working people to sign a blank cheque for those who do not accept their personal responsibility to help themselves" (3). The Amendment Regulations, in practice, amended Regulation 8 and Regulation 10A of the Income Support

(General) Regulations 1987, so that access would be removed "to hardship payments of Income Support from single people and couples without dependants who do not take reasonable steps to seek work actively" (4). Exceptionally, they were published despite the recommendations of the Social Security Advisory Committee, who recommended that the regulations be abandoned in view of their harshness, unfairness and inability to deal with what it also regarded as the problem of New Age Travellers and those unwilling to work.

Opposition to the amendment was muted- It was hard for anyone outside Parliament to even find out what was going on. Debates took place in the House of Lords on 1st December and in the relevant Commons Select Committee on 9th December: a full Commons debate was not required, as this was simply an amendment to existing legislation. The opposition political parties, and bodies such as the Church of England, opposed it but it was certainly not an issue that made the front pages of newspapers. The Regulations passed into law on 12th December: since then, it has become possible for a single person or childless couple to be deprived of all benefit for being deemed in breach of the actively seeking work regulations. As Lord Henley, Peter Lilley's deputy, put it in the House of Lords debate, "If (those out of work) are prepared actively to seek work they will receive benefit: if they are not there will be no benefit. It is as simple as that" (5).

At the time of writing (May 1993) the current situation for a single (able-bodied) claimant, or one without dependants, is this. On approaching the Employment Service, they are interviewed to justify their claim, and to lay down ground rules for their subsequent search for work. During their period of claiming benefit, they can be asked at any time to prove that they are searching for work. If they cannot do so, or turn down offers of work or training without just cause, they stand to lose all benefit until they can prove, again, that they are actively seeking work. In theory, they could be presented with the same unacceptable offer on a fortnightly basis, losing benefit by refusal: as in the film Spring and Port Wine, in which the rebellious daughter who refuses to eat a herring is presented with its rotting corpse at numerous mealtimes thereafter. One new form this can take is the JobPlan workshop, a two-week course for the long-term unemployed (twelve months or over) made compulsory from the beginning of April. Fifty or sixty hour a week jobs, at two or three pounds an hour, with no unions in sight and certainly no decent holidays, are also on the menu. When time is money, the choice for claimants can so often be polarized between them: to a devastating degree.

4. RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

So why has this situation come about? Some possible answers will now be considered, in an attempt to trace the reasoning behind this war against the 'workshy': It is possible that all of the following explanations are correct, even if some are more correct than others.

Firstly, there is the problem of increasing Governmental expenditure: of signing 'a blank cheque' at a time when the budget deficit is around £50 billion a year. The onus on all Ministers, at the moment, is on making cuts: and Peter Lilley, with the largest Ministerial budget (around £80 billion a year) is under more pressure than most. This has already led to the public consideration of radical moves such as the axing of universal pensions, the raising of the retirement age, the restriction of invalidity benefit, and the abolition of automatic free prescription rights for children and pensioners. Under such a regime, it is only natural that a Government who did not believe in the principle of unconditional benefit entitlement should seek to reduce their expenditure at the expense of those considered 'workshy' and in need of the sort of 'short sharp shock' that would goad them into seeking work.

This explanation falters, however, when one considers the savings involved. Even if the 6,333 claimants who failed the actively seeking work test in 1991-92 had also received the maximum rate of hardship benefit for a year, this would have cost the taxpayer less than £8 million, or one-thousandth of the current annual Social Security budget. This would save each taxpayer around 40p annually: hardly more than the cost of a single Daily Mail. Of course, there are individual taxpayers forking out that amount each year, even at the 40% top rate so generously introduced by the current Government. And, bearing in mind that only 850 claimants were actually awarded any hardship benefit in 1991-92, and not necessarily for long, the money saved is probably in thousands rather than in millions. Moreover, it is evident to all with sense that what is paid out in benefit is not stashed away in unnumbered Swiss bank accounts, but spent- increasing benefits, therefore, need not necessarily increase the burden on the State, as much as redistribute wealth. In view of the high percentage of benefit spent directly on home-produced goods and services, as opposed to expensive imports, it might even be argued that an efficient way of kick-starting the economy would be to raise taxes on the rich in order to finance increased benefits! That wouldn't work, of course, if everyone went on the dole, but since when has that possibility been on the

agenda? It is only likely to happen if working life is made intolerable for everyone: as will be discussed later, this is starting to happen almost by default, but it is still a barmy fear to build a policy around.

It seems more appropriate to consider this measure as part of a wider package of deterrents. Those out of work, and without dependants, are instilled with a sense of uncertainty: if they don't toe the line, by chasing work as 'suggested' by the Employment Service, or going on schemes as 'recommended' by Claimant Advisers, they run the risk of losing every penny of their income, as well as any automatic right to Housing and other benefits. Defined, whether or not they wish it so, as 'jobseekers' and 'customers' rather than as claimants, they are expected to form part of a labour pool in waiting, whose existence has a marked effect upon the rights and incomes of those in work. Moreover, there also appears to be an intention to make the experience of being out of work as unpleasant and uncomfortable as possible: not that it was pleasant or comfortable in the first place on forty pounds a week or less, but it may be noted that many jobs pay little more for a vast amount of hassle. Although only a pittance may be saved directly by this measure, its supporters may argue that a greater amount is saved by its capacity to encourage the unemployed into taking ill-paid and ill-conditioned work.

On the other hand, supporters would probably prefer to argue that the main reasons for this measure were moral rather than fiscal: that people who find the prospect of not working more attractive should be discouraged in order to preserve the social fabric. And, admittedly, this is a seductive argument to many - not just in the Conservative Party. For example, there is the Shadow Secretary of State for Health, David Blunkett, who confided to the Daily Express in June 1992 that "Labour has been linked to freeloaders for too long. I was brought up on a council estate and know ordinary folk expect rewards for hard work. They have no time for people who lie in bed when they are fit and able to get a job" (6). Since the regulations regarding hardship benefit came into force, there has been a new twist to the debate on this matter with John Major's coy support for some sort of work for benefit, expressed in a speech to the Carlton Club on 3rd February this year: a speech made, perhaps, in the context of US President Bill Clinton's support for this principle. Again, it was not just the Conservative Party who rallied behind Clinton's slogan of 'tough love': for example, a leader writer in The Guardian on 5th February stated that "the mandatory work (for benefit) principle must be right" and

argued, without going into the evidence, that surveys of the unemployed found the idea 'fair'. And, although he later came out in opposition to any compulsory scheme, the Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown also talked about establishing a "new contract of rights and obligations between the unemployed and society" in a speech around the same time (7). Such formulations evade the issue of how the weak can make a contract with the strong: If bullied, after all, the unemployed can hardly transfer their custom to another provider.

5. THE REVENGE OF THE HIPPIES

As the argument subsides, it becomes apparent that the likelihood of Workfare is not as great as one might fear: especially so in urban areas of high and concentrated unemployment. The reason for this is the cost of providing such a programme: In fact, many in the Right of the Conservative Party (such as David Willetts) came out against Workfare on the grounds that it constituted state-subsidized employment. In terms of savings to 'the taxpayer', the current approach: of providing minimal benefit levels and training opportunities, and of placing the onus on the unemployed to find themselves jobs from those available: is probably the most crudely economical. If Workfare schemes are introduced, they are certainly more likely in rural areas of low unemployment: in such areas, conditions may be coercive, but embarking on a massive Workfare programme in, for example, Merseyside or Tyneside, would be the kind of risky high-expenditure project more likely to be undertaken by a non-Conservative government. That, of course, will be no consolation to those out of work in the shires: for example, in North Norfolk, where a pilot Workfare scheme, under the tutelage of the local Tory MP, came into being recently. This made several hundred places available for the long-term unemployed in various community activities of the kind that local authorities used to do before they were rate-capped: It was intended that anyone refusing a place on this scheme would be subjected to compulsory Restart Interviews weekly, as opposed to the usual six-month interviews, presumably until they either signed off, obtained a job or cracked and joined the scheme.

The moral arguments obviously go back a long way, to the Poor Laws and beyond. People in work, especially in workaholic activities such as trade, hold a deep-seated resentment towards those who spend their time in allegedly 'non-contributory' ways. This is especially evident when those who do so flout 'society's rules': the rules of those who lead their lives in accordance with prevailing values. What the

Government and their supporters cannot stand about the New Age Travellers- whose existence acted as the catalyst, or excuse, for the curtailment of hardship benefit- is that they refuse to obey the rules. If those out of work are visibly depressed and humble, like the character Arthur Fowler in the TV soap *EastEnders*, and happy to enrol on Workfare schemes, then they are tolerated. If they do not want to work, but keep reasonably quiet, and go through the motions of seeking a job, then there is usually little that the State will do, beyond the odd Restart and JobPlan course: after all, it can hardly deliver three million jobs, or even a fraction of that figure. It can even tolerate, and patronize, those too disoriented to take advantage of the benefit system: if people want to sit in the gutter and quietly starve, it will either look the other way or extend a qualified hand. But when those claiming benefit dress up in odd clothes, travel around the country on rainbow-coloured buses smoking illegal substances and corrupting youth with noisy, pungent and chaotic festivals... then, it's war.

The hostility of those with power and money, and those who would like to acquire these assets, towards the visibly 'workshy' elements of the Convoy and other 'crusty' cohorts, is compounded by the fact that crustydom is becoming a more attractive option, for many, than sleeping in cardboard boxes, eking out a miserable existence in unheated bedsits, or slaving away in dead-end jobs. Those not allowed to contribute to society, except as impecunious slaves, are tending to lose patience with the prospect of doing so: and, if they are presented with an equally harsh, yet far more thrilling and convivial reality, then they will tend to welcome it. It is clear that the New Age Travellers fall into two main categories: for every counter-cultural guerrilla, there is at least another traveller who has taken to the road in reaction against miserable living and working conditions. For this very reason, the New Age Travellers have become a threat to 'Tory society': and, when the intention to curtail hardship benefit was announced last August, it is perhaps significant that the destruction of a council rubbish plant in Hampshire by a small group of headbangers was billed in one of the Tory tabloids as 'the revenge of the hippies'. It was as if an ancient war had surfaced: from the sixties, from the sixteen-fifties, and so on back into the Middle Ages.

6. A NEW FEUDALISM

But the 'threat' of the New Age Travellers is just one of a complex of reasons for the withdrawal of hardship benefit. As has been stated,

there are also the financial reasons: the much lesser direct saving, but also the much greater saving produced by deterring the unemployed from overstaying their frosty welcome to the dole. And there is also a final, related reason, which is that the unemployed are to be transformed into a reserve of cheap labour and an instrument in the removal of labour rights from those in jobs.

Whereas its European counterparts, as in Spain and Italy with their minimum wages, maximum working hours and generous leave provision (six weeks' minimum in both these countries) see no contradiction between a competitive economy and a satisfied workforce, the British government feels differently. Its view, quite simply, is that it is necessary to reduce wages and conditions to those of the Third World in order to compete with it. As a result, the unions have been muzzled to the point of near-irrelevance: Wages Councils have been effectively abolished; and a great amount of legislation protecting the rights of employees, especially those in temporary work or in the first two years of jobs, have been repealed. It's amazing just how much they have been allowed to get away with: but the end result is here and now, and few of us any more are blessed with a combination of good wages and conditions. Those who earn good wages generally have to work excessive hours in order to do so: and long hours are by no means a guarantee of decent wages. In short, the world of work, in the UK if not in Europe, is becoming the kind of lesser hell that most had thought forever vanished: and the Government actually proclaims the current state of affairs, boasting of the low wages paid to labour in order to grab a share of cut-price multi-national investment. The recent decision by Hoover, to locate in Cambuslang instead of Paris, is an example of the 'benefits' of this approach: and it is certainly possible that the Government would prefer semi-isolation, or even an exit from the European Community, to adopting the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty.

The result of this policy, on the ground, is a culture where people are expected to be thankful to their employers for having a job, no matter what the terms: and where they have neither job security, nor the benefits regime that would allow them to turn their backs on exploitative employers. This is nothing less than a new feudalism in emergence, based on the transformation of worker into vassal, and employer into liege. In such a situation, one's first duty is not to oneself, friends or family but to one's employer: where one lives is their decision: how one spends one's time is their decision, in that one is expected to give up one's free time at a moment's notice where

considered necessary: and one is answerable to one's employer for the very contents of one's thought. Lest this seem alarmist, consider how many people in this country are currently working more than fifty hours a week, and what it means in terms of how one spends one's days: there are millions. And consider how many of us are living where we would not choose to live, simply for the sake of work. Despite the hi-tech trappings, and the bribes and baubles we are offered, it is happening: and we, too, possess our paupers and our vagabonds.

The role of our 'paupers'- those without jobs, yet 'deserving' of support- is twofold. Firstly, they can take the jobs that no-one wants (even now) or vacated by others' militancy or sheer bad luck. An example of this can be found in the recent Timex dispute in Dundee, when workers at a factory, unwilling to agree to harsh new terms and conditions, were sacked and replaced by desperate, pressured men and women in search of jobs. And those desperate people, secondly, can also be used to depress wage claims, and suppress the struggle for better labour conditions, with the phrase 'there's plenty more out there would take your job'. And, with a rate of benefit hardly conducive to long-term survival, and Restart breathing down the necks of millions, it is hardly surprising that they would.

Unemployed people who refuse to go along with their rôle as battering-rams against the worst-off members of the workforce are categorized as 'scroungers' (ie, vagabonds): for this reason, thousands are now wondering from whence their next source of income will derive. They are the victims of a conspiracy that keeps wages low and retards conditions, thus generating extra profit for the rich at a time of increasing capital cost: the conspiracy (if it deserves such an intentional epithet) also helps to reduce welfare expenditure, by making unemployment as rocky a ride as possible, thus reducing taxes and securing the electoral favours of the necessary thirteen million amnesiacs. And all this is sold as some sort of moral crusade against a 'something for nothing society' of socially-illiterate, obnoxious parasites!

As benefits lag behind prices, moreover, more and more people will be adopting nomadic lifestyles which will lead them to be tarred with the same descriptions: and in the shires of England, local benefit regimes will lead to sporadic, yet locally-damaging purges of those considered workshy (especially as Employment Service managers are now rewarded for reducing the unemployment figures, seemingly at any cost). From March to April 1993, for example, 2,000 people were alleged

to have mysteriously 'vanished' from the jobless figures in Shanklin Isle of Wight (a town of under 20,000 inhabitants) (8): as purges are launched and bonuses loom large, anyone on the dole in a small town or village in the wrong part of England could well have some fairly frenetic justification to be done. Certainly, wherever one lives, it has become de rigueur to provide an alibi for one's claimancy in the form of a file of job descriptions and rejection slips: an absurd situation, driving Personnel Offices to desperation and deforesting considerable areas of the Northern Hemisphere to no avail.

7. PAY UP AND SHUT UP

And what of this 'moral crusade' anyway? Is it really correct to say that someone in work is necessarily contributing more to society than someone out of it? Moreover, does it matter at a time when the number of available jobs is out of sync with the number of able-bodied adults, and in which a sudden influx of three million suitable applicants would not in itself create three million jobs?

The answer to the second question, of course, is that it does not matter in the slightest. Any remotely tolerable vacancy, these days, will be chased by many willing seekers after work: the vast majority of those on the dole are happy to work, and are prepared to do something about it in so far as they are not demoralized. Most of these would also be willing to take part in a passable training package, or some sort of voluntary community service if it helped them back to work: the relative popularity of the Community Programme proved this, in the early to middle eighties, when there seemed to be no shortage of volunteers for the socially-beneficial jobs the Programme offered. In such circumstances, it is totally irrelevant if a minority of those without work do not want work on the terms offered. It is not as if essential services are going unprovided for want of volunteers: it is because the number of jobs has decreased, and because of the deterrent effect of National Insurance on flexible modes of work, that there is currently a shortfall of around three million between the number of vacancies and the number expected to be in search of them. The State should "pay up and shut up" was how a friend put it (9), and it can really seem as simple as that. On the other hand, this argument can be turned around, in order to squeeze the admission that yes, it would be right to revive an inquisitorial Employment Service if the jobless total slid below one million. This is quite another statement: anyone conceding it would reveal themselves as party to the dominant paradigm, that

states the primacy of paid employment above all other activities. And that is the paradigm that must be challenged.

There are two aspects to the argument that the value of a person's contribution to society can be measured through their work. The first is that we should all be expected to contribute to society in ways that 'it' (i.e. its dominant class) approves: the second is that the creation of 'work-free zones' within society will corrode its fabric.

Those who emphasize the second aspect of the argument rarely live at the sharp end of the system. It is not unemployment that disfigures society but poverty: if income is available, people will spend it, generating vibrant local economies. Many areas of the UK are now so starved of capital as to make it impossible to regenerate them by the usual means: the occasional scheme won't help, as the money spent will translate largely into bureaucratic and running expenses, as well as profit for external agencies. The more a neighbourhood is strafed for cash, the more it turns to illegal ways of getting by, pilfering money from its surrounding areas by drugs and theft: a downward spiral eventuates, with the criminal income calling the shots. It's been happening in ghettos and favellas all around the world, and now it's happening in the ghettos and favellas of the cities of the UK. Is worklessness or poverty responsible for this? Does anyone want to risk acquiring evidence, by translating City Challenge money into a guaranteed basic income for the inhabitants of an impoverished neighbourhood?

In response to the first aspect of the argument, that work is necessarily good, it can also be argued that many jobs are harmful to the human interest, such as those in the arms trade and others involving the sale of dubious 'services' (mortgages, loans etc) that a civilized society could abolish by way of community housing and credit: that others simply generate other jobs in an interminable paperchase: and that there are many other activities, in any case, that are humanly essential but do not fall into the category of paid employment. Such activities would include informal caring, creative activities and social networking. Certainly, many (if not in the Conservative Party) would consider it barbaric for innovative, possibly non-commercial activity in the arts to be considered 'unnecessary': one wonders, however, how the likes of Blake, Van Gogh and Rimbaud would have fared at the hands of today's Employment Service (Rimbaud, thankfully, would have screwed them something rotten). Some, of course, may believe that there is a direct correlation between artistic integrity and commercial success:

but when it comes to voluntary activity in the community, most would consider that an unemployed person who passed their time in such activities was of far more benefit to the community than someone in work selling double-glazing to people who would have obtained it anyway if they had wanted it. The absurdity is that we are expected to swallow the opposite argument, in the cause of social responsibility, and in a situation where the essential activity of defining the minimum (and maximum) amount of work required to maintain an amenable and truly sustainable society has scarcely been addressed.

8. REBELLING BY EXAMPLE

It appears that the current controllers of British society want us to work long hours for low wages, with little in the way of employment rights. They want the unemployed to function as a two-fold device: to prevent resistance from the workforce and as a source of cheap and casual labour. And if they can go on pampering thirteen million slaves, or feed their illusions, at intervals of four or five years, they will be able to continue their war against the wage-slaves and the dole-slaves of society, for the sake of profits for a few and bribes for a sufficient proportion of the others. So far, it's worked. In pursuance of these aims, moreover, they've been allowed to play the moral card, to the delight of the ignorant and churlish, and with the bonus of support from people, like David Blunkett, who should know better. The end result is a situation in which far more people seem tense than happy: where the ambience, increasingly, is one of curdled misery and fear. Perhaps this is also what was wanted: because it encourages people to cling to the rafts of what they own, kicking out at all who look as if they might remove it from them. This is nothing to do with morality, unless one redefines morality as the crystallization of short-term selfishness. And those who do not wish to continue in this way are (as yet) divided.

Those who are actually seen to enjoy themselves, however, despite a lack of work or cash, are becoming more visible. And, of course, they are a threat: rebelling by example, they confound the expectations of their would-be slaves. After all, it was not the fact that the New Age Travellers were signing on without looking for work that created such a wave of anger, or even the more anti-social aspects of their behaviour: it was the fact that they were out there having festivals: taking drugs, making love, lying in the sun and listening to Tantric music. What an affront!

Of course, it's hard to dispute that week-long raves at megablast volumes, near populated places such as Castlemorton, are as anti-social in spirit as benefit cuts, if not nearly as harmful. There is a reactive petulance about them which is scarcely surprising. In addition to their frenzied hedonism: an attitude of 'you don't care about us, so why should we care about you?' is indicated. This is a weakness in what, at root, is one expression of a corrective world-view that may redeem our civilization and make it inhabitable once more. For in the 'spiral culture' of the ravers, crusties and New Age Travellers, with its emphasis on partnership, non-materialistic hedonism and ecological spirituality, a reaction to the excesses of free market, neo-feudal capitalism is evident. This is far more potent than the mirror-images of orthodox Socialism, which have long since lost their sparkle beneath the onslaught of sophisticated media: but spiral culture is able to respond to souped-up hedonism with the genuine article. And the persecution of the New Age Travellers, as of all who reject the prevailing view that to earn and spend is the essence of life, suggests that the Government are really rather scared of all this fun.

In the short term, the actions of Peter Lilley and his colleagues have brought misery to thousands, and a latent sense of doom to millions. Signing on, these days, is like going on trial for one's physical well-being: and a simple call to return benefit arrangements to how they were, even a decade ago, might be considered as subversive: not just to the Tories, but to the other major political parties. That is how the ground has shifted. If there is any consolation in this, it is that a return to reasonable conditions for those out of work can be integrated within a radical resistance strategy: it is no longer simply reformist to challenge the obsessive nature of the prevailing work ethic, or the persecution of the so-called workshy. Moreover, it will be possible for such a strategy to address the moral platitudes employed in favour of the tyranny of work: and, with intelligence and tact, to communicate resistance to a wide variety of people. Certainly, the false economies of benefit warfare are transparent: and, as Spiral Tribe might say, "a floating leaf will always reach the sea" (10). Moreover, when we are so busily engaged in using up resources on behalf of our descendants, working ourselves into a grave called Unlimited Economic Growth, then a floating leaf or two will scarcely multiply the load. We can live at an adequate level (if we are not greedy) and maintain a liberal benefits regime, whilst carrying the occasional social passenger at worst: that is a price worth paying for a civilized society.

Slaveship Britain hits the slipway. It is immaterial whether we choose to resist it by advocating a reversal of current sanctions; a more positive option, such as a guaranteed Basic Income Scheme (an expensive remedy, yet one for which many creative people, and workers with intermittent earning potential, cannot wait); or by simply enjoying ourselves, at the expense of a society that is becoming stale and glum and stiff and desperate. Either way, we will be resisting not only for ourselves, but for those who are currently existing from hand to mouth, occasionally going under; and, not only for those who exist from hand to mouth, occasionally going under, but for ourselves... for the kind of lives that we would like to lead. The extent of our slavery, after all, has nothing to do with the length- or lustre- of our chains.

NORMAN JOPE

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